

Making the Palmdale PROMISE an everyday reality

By Ed Goldman | February 3, 2020

In Southern California, the San Gabriel Mountains may separate Los Angeles from the city of Palmdale but for Palmdale School District Superintendent Raul Maldonado, nothing needs to be separate, including classes at two of the district's schools that offer instruction in English half the time and in Spanish the other half, for a student's entire nine years there. "It's our dual immersion plan," Mr. Maldonado says.

"If we get more students who speak Farsi, we may add a third component for Arabic-speaking children."

"The kids who've gone through the dual immersion program," Mr. Maldonado says, "have scored higher on academic testing than those who haven't." Mainly, he says, "It allows young people to be able to speak about their schoolwork with their parents, grandmas and grandpas who may not speak English." He takes particular pride in the fact that recently, "two young girls here won an essay contest—writing in Spanish," sponsored by the California Association for Bilingual Education.

"The Palmdale PROMISE," Mr. Maldonado says, quoting from the district's strategic plan he helped create, "is about multilingualism and multiculturalism." The district considers those to be "individual, community, national and global assets in the 21st century." A moment later he adds with a grin, "What this means is that we love all of our kids equally here."

The district has 28 K-8 schools, 19,000 students and "administrative transparency," says Mr. Maldonado. He has served as superintendent for the past six years. He previously worked at the district in an assessment role, leaving to assume the superintendent's job at the McFarland School District in Kern County. During that assignment, the Kevin Costner movie *McFarland, USA*, about McFarland High School's championship track team, was filmed there, and Mr. Maldonado worked with the production company to allow some of its team to offer the students informal sessions on film-making. "That was a proud moment," he recalls. "The kids got some



"The Palmdale PROMISE means we are engaging ALL students in powerful learning and preparing high achieving, multilingual, responsible, and successful 21st century citizens."

Raul Maldonado, Superintendent

real-life, hands-on education—and I think the professionals were delighted to pitch in."

Currently working on his doctorate in education, Mr. Maldonado—the father of four grown children ranging in age from 20-25, whose wife works as an instructional assistant in another district—says his best advice to other education leaders is "to put in the hours. It's not just about working long, it's also about working smart, and that means planning."

"For example," he continues, "if we need to change one of the components in our strategic plan, we do it by letting everyone know that something isn't

working. We created the Palmdale PROMISE, but that's not a singular item: It contains about 177 actions that we decided to take—and many that we've already taken."

In fact, Mr. Maldonado says the creation of the current strategic plan—unlike earlier plans that had been the result of "a weekend retreat"—brought together dozens of stakeholders "who felt they were invested in the success of our outcomes. This wasn't a rush job—and if you go to our website, you'll see we've clearly presented the journey we took and are continuing to take."

"Under Raul Maldonado, Palmdale School District has taken the absolute right approach to the roles of transparency and inclusiveness in leadership," says Susan Cook, Chief Operating Officer of School Innovations & Achievement. The national education solutions firm, based in the Sierra foothills, created and manages Attention2Attendance, a software-and-services program to address the challenge of absences in schools. It has recently begun a partnership with Palmdale to help them fulfill one of their promises: High intellectual performance that prepares every student to graduate, ready for college, career and to meet the world with 21st century skills. "Superintendent Maldonado," Ms. Cook says, "recognizes the value of kids showing up, from a very early age, to help ensure their success in the future."